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ABSTRACT

In order to better understand the characteristics of the Chicano dialect of English, 93 freshman composition papers written by 48 Chicano students at Pan American University in Edinburg, Texas, were examined. The primary concern of this examination was to categorize, ultimately to explain, the morphological and syntactical variations from a norm. Two methods were used in this study: contrastive analysis, useful primarily for explaining phonological differences, and error analysis. Preliminary findings of the study show that further research should focus on whether the systematic variations discovered in these written samples are features integrated into the Chicano dialect of English or are idiosyncratic oversights or errors. (JM)

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Chicano Compositions: Interference, Intralanguage, Integration

Celia Merrill

The conscientious teacher of English composition faces a real dilemma in the question of whether to teach or not to teach--more accurately to insist or not to insist upon--Standard English usage in student writing. Linguistic research in the past decade has shown that many sentences previously marked awkward, garbled or incoherent are in fact grammatical constructions which conform to a student's dialect of spoken English. Since those dialects with the greatest divergence from the standard are often the speech dialects of ethnic minority groups, the issue is emotionally charged; and educators, businessmen, sociologists, linguists, and politicians alike have felt compelled to state their piece. On the one hand, Newsweek (December 8, 1975) reports that "Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semi-literates."[1] The reporter bases this contention on statistics given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, on the "cries of dismay...in the halls of commerce, industry and the professions," and on

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the testimonies of numerous educators associated with language development and communication at all levels. The article closes with the sentiment that "If the written language is placed at the mercy of every new colloquialism and if every fresh dialect demands and gets equal sway, then we will soon find ourselves back in Babel."[2]

Much of the criticism here is aimed at the authors of the Conference on College Composition and Communication's resolution regarding students' right to their own language, which states, "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style....We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language."[3] In direct opposition to the majority of those cited in the Newsweek article, these educators believe that no one dialect is inherently superior, that dialect prestige is externally imposed and shifts along with the economical or political power of that dialect's speakers. An attack on a student's language is equated with an unjustified attack on that student's cultural, and ethnic, identity. In a recent article appearing in College English, Ricardo Garcia continues with this argument, warning the English composition teacher against penalizing Chicano students for language differences, suggesting instead that

the phonological and morphological variations from Standard English be considered "natural manifestations of the language of the community."[4]

Either extreme shows strong emotional influence, the argument in some cases provoked as much by a reaction for or against the student himself as his language. Clearly, a more complete understanding of the linguistics involved is needed before the issue can be approached and resolved on less emotional grounds. With more exact dialect descriptions, composition teachers will be better able to distinguish between nonstandard grammatical variations which are dialect-related and those which might reflect the semi-literacy and imprecise thought charged by the Newsweek article. While numerous studies of Black English have provided considerable information on that particular dialect, comparatively little has been done toward describing the dialects found in the Southwestern states, with their large populations of speakers of Spanish and of American Indian languages. Research proposals and preliminary findings constitute much of what has been done; most often these are collected in hard-to-find publications of workshop proceedings[5] and scattered theses.[6]

To begin to define the Chicano dialect of English, I have been working with a set of 93 freshman composition papers written by 48 Chicano students at Pan American University in Edinburg, Texas. The papers were collected

with non-statistical randomness from several composition classes, so I have anywhere from 1 to 5 essays from each student. The length of writing and the topics vary; grades range from A to F, with most graded D or F. What I have done is to record each instance of English usage which seemed to me to vary from the accepted standard. My primary concern has been to categorize, ultimately to explain, the morphological and syntactical variations from a norm, excluding those errors of sentence fragments, dangling modifiers, misspelled words, etc., which are common in the writing of most freshmen, no matter how nearly their speaking dialects approach the dialect of Edited American English. The possibilities for working with such a set of papers are virtually unlimited; statistical counts, implicational analyses, orthographic error counts and Chicano stylistics are but a few of the many other potential areas for study.

For classifying these variations from Standard English I have devised the following categories (See the Appendix for samples). PREPOSITIONS, ARTICLES, and CONJUNCTIONS are three of the groups, and within each of these I have distinguished between instances of unusual choice among functors, functor omitted or functor used unnecessarily. Similarly, the category of PLURAL has been divided into instances of nouns missing plural markers and nouns which have unnecessary plural markers. I recorded one instance of an adjective, "negatives," marked plural to agree with its noun. Under

the category of POSSESSIVES are grouped cases in which the possessive marker was omitted on a noun used as an adjective and cases in which the possessive marker was omitted in a pronominal form. The small number of variations classed under the category of NEGATIVE PLACEMENT included one instance each of missing negative marker and unusual negative placement, and two instances of negative concord.

The category of MORPHOLOGY includes irregular verb spellings, or substitutions of a noun for the adjective form, an adjective for the adverb form, etc. Again a small group, ADJECTIVE variations include unusual use or nonuse of possessive or demonstrative adjectives. Under the simple heading of NOUNS and PRONOUNS are the subgroups of omitted or unnecessary noun or pronoun, unusual relative pronoun usage, and omitted subject, which I have grouped separately because of its regularity in the Spanish grammatical system. VERBS include instances of unusual passivized construction; omitted, unnecessary or otherwise unusual modals; omitted or unnecessary auxiliary "have"; differences between past and present participle usage; missing past participle marker (in adjective and compound verb forms); missing or double past tense marker; and unusual aspectual conjugation. NOUN PHRASE COMPLEMENTS include differences in the manner of embedding clauses in noun phrase positions, for instance, in the use of an infinitive complement where rule restrictions require a gerundive or clausal complement. The variations

listed under NUMBER AGREEMENT are distinguished as cases of faulty agreement between subject and verb, between adjective and noun, and between noun and noun/pronoun. Unusual word choice and instances of incorrect word usage where the correct word and the one used are either formally or phonetically similar are classed under the heading of DICTION. Faulty English idioms and apparent Spanish idiomatic expressions directly translated are distinguished under the class of IDIOM. And finally, the category of SYNTAX includes instances of reversed word order within a phrase or clause, and one instance of reversed word order in an embedded question.

The methods developed for examining language acquisition, in particular those dealing with second language acquisition, are useful in accounting for the variant English constructions in these Chicano compositions. The underlying assumption in most recent research on second language acquisition is that the second language learner, much like the child acquiring a first language, constructs a grammatical system for the target language by devising, testing, ultimately rejecting or accepting various hypotheses about grammatical rules. At any point in his development, the learner is producing sentences with systematic errors which may violate the accepted rules of the target language but which nonetheless conform to a transitional set of rules, a learner's grammar variously labeled "idiosyncratic dialect,"[7] "approximative system,"[8] or "interlanguage."[9]

The researcher's task is to examine the systematic errors, using the methods of contrastive analysis and the so-called "error analysis" to describe and explain the learner's grammar.

Contrastive analysis, by juxtaposing the two systems of native and target language, would account for those errors in which the learner has transferred the rules of one language to the other. Robert Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures is a text in which contrastive analysis is proposed as a means for predicting and describing (and finally correcting) the patterns which would likely cause difficulty in language learning,[10] and since its publication in 1957 the method has been popular in curriculum theory and design. More recently, the adequacy of contrastive analysis in accounting for the actual errors which learners produce has been questioned. Researchers have followed the technique prescribed in Common Errors in English by F. G. Franch, who contends that many of the errors, common to speakers of any number of native languages, cannot be explained as native language interference but are instead attributable to intralingual interference from the different structures of English itself.[11]

A combination of the two methods will, at this stage, most completely describe the learner's dialect, since, realistically, the learner probably formulates his hypotheses about rules based on information from his native language and from what he has already learned of English.

Although the two methods can also be used to describe the system of English used by these Chicano students, we must keep in mind that the grammar here is a relatively fixed dialect, unlike the transitional dialect of the language learner. The sources of many of the variable rules can be traced to interference from Spanish or from within English, but the point of transfer is remote, many variant structures now learned along with standard structures as the commonly accepted usage of the speech community.

The instances of unnecessary or omitted prepositions clearly illustrate how both methods of analysis are needed to fully explain the different structures. In some cases of unnecessary preposition, for instance in the sentence "The weather suits for the type of crops," explanation of the irregularity can be found by translating to Spanish, "El tiempo es apropriado para el tipo de cosechas," where the preposition is required. Similarly, the missing preposition in the sentence "I had plenty time" can be traced to the parallel Spanish expression "Tuvo bastante tiempo." The surplus preposition in the sentence "It (was) actually up to us to think up of something to do" is probably attributable to a confusion between using the verb particle "up" and the preposition "of," either of which alone would have been acceptable. Cases of omitted prepositions not traceable to Spanish and not obviously caused by haste or carelessness can often be explained as unfamiliarity with restrictions on verb particles, as in the sentence "The

laws enforced are strict depending if the person is arrested with various kinds of drugs."

With its highly inflected verb system, Spanish provides a distinction between two types of past tense: the perfective or completed action and the imperfective or durative action. English distinguishes between the simple past and the past progressive, but, in addition to the imperfective, Spanish has two forms for expressing past progressive using the perfective/imperfective forms of "estar" as auxiliary verb.[12] Textbooks ordinarily set up a correspondence between English simple past and Spanish perfective, and between English past progressive or past habitual form "used to" and Spanish imperfective, but the correspondence is not exact and the loss of distinction may cause the native Spanish speaker some doubt about the correct conjugation. To translate the Spanish sentence "Ella vinó para verlo y le gustaba mucho" into English, the Spanish speaker must choose between several English forms, none of which quite matches the imperfective "gustaba." The simple past ordinarily translates from the perfective, and so the verb "liked" doesn't seem to fit. "Was liking" or "used to like," the usual translations given for the imperfective, are obviously not right. The selection by this Chicano writer of the past perfect, with its sense of relevant anteriority, appears to me to be a logical resolution of the difficulty: "She came to see it and she had liked it quite a bit." Contrastive analysis points to the

imperfect parallel in verb systems but does not fully explain the writer's choice. Error analysis identifies other uses of the past perfect as having possibly led the writer to this selection.

For many of the Standard English variations, contrastive analysis provides a complete explanation. Unusual word choices are often a result of direct language transfer, as are many idiomatic expressions: "We went to Diana's house and heard records," "The second major step is to put the stove on," "So I had to put enough volume in order for her to hear it," "This past year my family has come across hapiness and sorrow," and "A couple of policemen got off the car." Among the often clichéd prose of freshman compositions, these idioms have undoubtedly been a welcome bit of freshness for many a tired reader. Irregular preposition usage, one type of unusual word choice, was by far the largest single class of variations, with two-thirds, 32 of the 48 writers, having at least one instance of a variation. Here again contrastive analysis serves to explain a great many of the differences, particularly those involving "in" and "on," since Spanish has only one preposition, "en," which serves for both.

Contrastive analysis is considered useful primarily for explaining phonological differences. In written English, the frequent absence of past tense and past participle markers can be attributed to the absence of similar final consonant clusters in the Spanish phonological system.

Because the few studies done of Spanish interference on written English have pointed only to these and lexical variations, the method of contrastive analysis is believed to be of minor importance in accounting for syntactical variations. Omitted subject pronouns and unusual word order such as transposed adjective-noun sequences are the only syntactical variations ordinarily traced to Spanish. In these university-level compositions, neither of these occurred with any significant frequency, and many of the instances recorded instead appear to be stylistic (sentence fragments, varied sentence style) rather than interference-related. A closer study reveals, however, that some syntactical variations of a much less obvious type can be at least partially explained as Spanish interference.

The process by which a clause under the noun phrase heading is embedded into a sentence depends to a great extent on the matrix sentence verb. Restrictions on these verbs prescribe whether the complement should be in the infinitive form (*for*...*to*), in the clausal form (*that* + sentence) or in the gerundive form (possessive...-*ing*). For instance, Spanish uses the gerundive complement only with a small class of verbs of observation and perception; in many cases in which standard usage of English requires the gerundive, the parallel form in Spanish would be the infinitive complement.[13] The writer of the sentence "Poor condition and surrounding will sometime be the cause of students to

dropout" followed the Spanish rather than English form. The different restrictions in the two languages governing complementizer deletion would also explain the undeleted "for" in the sentence "This caused for Pedro to miss one year of school." A particularly fascinating variation occurs in the sentence "It was a very interesting and exciting experience which I believe never to forget." "Believe" belongs to that class of English verbs which will take an infinitive object complement only in cases where the subject of the embedded clause has been raised to object position, "I believe you to be honest," or it will take a clausal complement, "I believe that I will never forget," but it cannot take an infinitive complement in which the subject of the embedded clause has simply undergone equi-noun phrase deletion, "I believe never to forget." Spanish "creer" takes the infinitive complement when the embedded clause has undergone equi-noun phrase deletion and requires the clausal complement in other cases. The writer of this sentence may well be following complement restrictions prescribed by Spanish rather than English.

Error analysis offers a different explanation for the occurrence. Because the verb "hope" is acceptable with either a clausal complement, "I hope that I will forget," or with an infinitive complement which has undergone equi-noun phrase deletion, "I hope to forget," the writer's variation might be attributed instead to an overgeneralization or carry over of the learned restrictions on the verb

"hope" and others of its type, causing the misapplication of the restrictions on the verb "believe." Sentences containing examples of temporal concord, that is an unnecessary past tense marker, also provide evidence of possible overgeneralization of rules. In the sentence "At first, I would become upset if they did not learned a new game or the alphabet," the nonstandard marking of past tense on the main verb "learn" following auxiliary "do" conforms to the standard attaching of a past participle affix to the main verb when it follows auxiliary verb "have." Other instances of temporal concord occurred with uses of modal auxiliaries which, like the tense-carrier "do," carry no affix to be attached to the following verb. The absence in Spanish of auxiliary "do" and of modals similar in form to the English modals presents further explanation for the occurrences.

Once these deviations from the standard usage have been examined for possible native language or intralingual interference, the question remains whether each is a feature integrated into the Chicano dialect of English or simply an idiosyncratic oversight or error. From the systematic variations discovered in these written samples, an elicitation experiment can be designed to test over a much larger population whether the features are in fact regularly used.

Obviously, my work would be described as "preliminary findings," but with this information and that provided by continuing research, we can begin to truly <u>understand</u> and respect language diversity.

NOTES

[1]Merrill Sheils, "Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek, 86 (Dec 8 75): 58.

[2]Sheils, 65.

[3]"Students' Right to Their Own Language," College Composition and Communication, 25 (Fall, 74, Special Issue):2-3.

[4]Ricardo L. García, "A Linguistic Frame of Reference for Critiquing Chicano Compositions," College English, 37, No. 2 (October, 1975): 188.

[5]Southwest Areal Languages and Linguistics Workshop (SWALLOW) annual publication of proceedings, Linguistic Association of the Southwest (LASSO) publication of proceedings, and Papers in Southwest English (PISE) publications.

[6]Particular to my study are Master's theses by Tommy Lou Teel, "A sociolinguistic Study of Spanish Linguistic Interference and Nonstandard Grammatical Phonema in the Written English of Selected Mexican American Bilinguals," MA Thesis University of Texas at El Paso 1971; and Caroline Willard, "A Linguistic Analysis of Written Compositions by Mexican-American Students on College English Placement Examinations," MA Thesis University of Texas at Austin 1971.

[7]S. Pit Corder, "Idiosyncratic Dialects and Error Analysis," IRAL 9, No. 2, (1971): 147.

[8]William J. Nemser, "Approximative Systems of Foreign Language Learners," IRAL 9, No. 2, (1971): 115.

[9]Larry Selinker, "Interlanguage," IRAL 10, No. 3, (1972): 219.

[10]Robert Lado, Linguistics Across Cultures, Applied Linguistics for Language Teaching (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), vii.

[11]F. G. French, Common Errors in English, (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 7-8.

[12]The conjugation form using the preterit of "estar" with the past participle affix occurs rarely.

NOTES (cont.)

13For information on complement restrictions I used R. P. Stockwell, J. D. Bowen and J. W. Martin, The Grammatical of English and Spanish, Contrastive Structure Series,(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). José Galvan, doctoral candidate in the Foreing Language Education program at the University of Texas at Austin, also provided me with much information on Spanish.

APPENDIX

PREPOSITIONS
choice: he was limping from his right leg
omitted: while we waited the return
unnecessary: the weather suits for the type of crops

ARTICLES
choice: although in this life a birth of a baby
omitted: the enchiladas are made in similar way
unnecessary: the Delta Lake

CONJUNCTIONS
choice: however our year was filled with sorrow; happiness was imminent
omitted: my car just lost control and went straight ahead hit something
unnecessary: you talk about the good and old times

PLURAL
omitted: they are only freshman, junior, or seniors
unnecessary: an entire different words

POSSESSIVE
adjective: the Volunteer Army will soon become ineffective in carrying out it mission
pronoun: it is her fault and no one else

NEGATIVE PLACEMENT
because I or my sister have not bought her anything

MORPHOLOGY
For example, by voting for an incompetence and selfish leadership

ADJECTIVES
possessive: which was my happiest day of my life
demonstrative: it was for that punishment (first mention)

NOUNS and PRONOUNS
omitted: the tacos and the enchiladas are two of the most popular thru out the United States and other countries
unnecessary: the word shirt in other parts of the world it means
relative pronoun: we'd make fun of the manner he spoke Spanish
omitted subject: Also, played his organ with alot of class.

VERBS
passive: for instance, corn is referred to a particular cereal crop (the word "corn")
modal: there are other kinds of persons who rather have friends
<u>have</u>: attuides can be changed once they been tried

participle choice: this advertisement emphasizes the durability of the fabric and the guard against soil and stain that makes the people more convincing about this product
past participle marker: I feel depress
tense, omitted: I use to have in mind
tense, double: when did it happened
aspect: It is not a complicated thing to do but the cook needs to be watching it

NOUN PHRASE COMPLEMENTS
verb restrictions: the rice requires to be watch about every 5 minutes
complementizer deletion: the rains cause for the streets to flood in the cities and for animals to die
it deletion: so happens that my boss is my brother-in-law

NUMBER AGREEMENT
When two players disagrees

DICTION
word choice: everything is disorderly moved around
similarity: their times when I sit around doing nothing (there are)

IDIOM
English: to realize that Santa Clause was made believe
Spanish: the second major step is to put the stove on

SYNTAX
phrase: to my view of point
clause: some trouble we found ourselves in

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